

## Montco prison expansion on time, on budget

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**The county broke ground for the 512-bed expansion and renovation project in June.**

**On time. On budget.**

Montgomery County Warden Julio M. Algarin couldn't help but smile when using those words to give an update on the progress of an addition at the county prison in Lower Providence.

And while some might lead with the budget, Algarin - who's always careful with the county's money - chose to instead lead with on time.

"Everything is on target right now to open in June," said the warden, adding that the first of four 128-bed modular units is expected to arrive in January.

"We visited the manufacturer to take a look at it (modular unit) and it is almost completed and looking good," said Algarin.

The four modular units are being built and assembled by NRB USA Inc. in Ephrata, Lancaster County.

Montgomery County officials broke ground in late June for the 512-bed expansion and renovation project. Since that time, contractors have been swarming the site to grade it, put in foundations and trenches for utilities, steel work and the connections to which the modular units will be hooked.

"I've been involved in a couple of expansion projects now and I have never seen a group of contractors more cooperative with one another," said Algarin.

The estimated cost of the project is about \$25 million.

The county is preparing to go out on an approximate \$60 million, 20-year bond issue later this year, with some \$21 million of that borrowing earmarked for the prison project. The remaining funds came from an earlier bond issue.

There are no state or federal funds available for prison projects and, as a result, county taxpayers will have to pick up the tab, officials said.

The prison recently increased its fees, including work-release fees, which is expected to generate about \$300,000 annually to help defray debt service of about \$1.7 million a year.

To further help with costs, once the expansion is finished, prison administrators will ask federal authorities about the possibility of temporarily housing illegal immigrants awaiting deportation. The federal government pays between \$90 and \$100 a day to house immigration violators, according to Algarin.

The dormitory-style housing project is designed to help alleviate the serious overcrowding that has plagued correctional officials in recent years.

The prison, initially built to house 1,240 male and female inmates, was already expanded once to accommodate 1,500 inmates. However, in recent years, that population has soared to an average of about 1,700 prisoners, even with the courts and probation departments using alternative means to deal with some inmates.

"Right now, we have about 12 additional temporary housing units (in places like the gyms)," said Algarin, noting that the inmate population on Oct. 31 was 1,881. "We are dealing with it, but it's a balancing act and I will be happy when we get the additional bed space."

The addition will be used to house inmates on work release, those serving in community service programs and those serving time for DUIs. The "hard cells" in the other section of the prison will still be used for offenders who commit more serious crimes, said Algarin.